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ABSTRACT

Six pupils were selected at random from each of grades one through eight in a single school and were asked to write a rough draft of any length on any topic of interest to them. The 48 resulting essays were analyzed for errors in punctuation and sentence structure. Results indicated that elementary school children have difficulty in placing punctuation at the end of a sentence, in treating their ideas separately, and in capitalizing the beginning of a new sentence. Run-on sentences were a problem across the grades. Tables summarize the types of errors made by 50% or more of the students at each grade level and those made by 10% to 50% of all of the students. (AA)

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"YOUNG WRITERS' ERROR TENDENCY"

By Chet Mazur

Whenever the writings of pupils were assessed there appeared to be one error most frequently occurring and made by the most writers. Changing grade levels didn't make any difference, the error seemed to persistently occur.

Were students playing games? Was this error becoming distorted? In questioning other teachers their responses seemed positive, negative or evasive.

With this stimulation of curosity it was decided to find out if run on sentences (defined on Page 5) were a nagging problem in this school.

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The hunch was: Run on sentences were the most occurring error of our young writers in grades 1 through 8. If this hunch was true then it is a concern for all the grade teachers calling out for attention and corrective measures.

With the help of some colleagues a study was organized to see if this was true in the school I was teaching in.

All the pupils in the school were given a number and the computer randomly selected six pupils from each grade one through eight. These 48 pupils were informed by their regular teacher or English Teacher that a sample of their writing was needed for a study. They were requested to write a rough draft of any length on any topic of interest to them. Their papers, they were assured, would not be used for grades or affect their class work in any way. If they were going to make any corrections rather than erase it was suggested that they just draw a line through whatever corrections they wanted to make. Their papers would be returned to them if they so desired.

With very little prompting a one hundred per cent return was obtained from the faculty at the van den Berg Learning School of Practice in New Paltz, New York.

This Campus School of approximately 325 students ranges from nursery school through eighth grade. All strata of students are represented in each grade. The school is open to everyone desiring to attend by means of the lottery system. Various types of teaching styles are offered. Teachers of various ages, talents and interests make up the staff. One major difference, besides commitment to research, innovations and college responsibilities, then that of most public schools, is that the Practice School hosts many participants, observers and student teachers from the college.

As the analyzing of the pupils' writing proceeded, the errors were listed and tallied as they appeared. In this manner a comparison could be arranged to give support as to just what were the most frequent occurring errors across the grades.

While six samples of children's writing per grade level, with a total of 48 represents a limited sampling, there appeared to be some tendencies which appeared consistent enough to recognize and raise certain questions.

In this project these terms are defined as follows:

1) A sentence to be a group of words expressing a complete thought.

2) A run on sentence is two or more different ideas joined together without punctuation, capitalization and conjunction or continuous use of conjunctions to add additional thoughts.

3) A fragment is a group of words not expressing a complete thought but not an interjection.

It is clearly recognized that the findings of this survey indicates the tendency of young writers' errors in a particular school at a certain time and in no way suggests the existence of this situation in other schools. Follow up studies may uncover new data to give additional evidence.

The following represents questions for which the study indicated some responses. In your school at this time what would you theorize the answers to the questions would be?

To what extent are run on sentences a problem across the grades?

This study revealed that after grade two more than 50% of the pupils on each grade level made run on sentences. The rate of occurrence when compared to the total words written for grades three through eight occurred on the average of once per 53 words.

What grade makes the fewest run on sentences?

The sample showed grade one with only 2 run on sentences. When comparing run on sentences to the total words written grade one again had the fewest run on sentences. In this grade there appeared one run on sentence per every one hundred eleven words.

What grade makes the most run on sentences?

The data of this study revealed grade five with a total of 36 run on sentences out of a total of 1192 words.

What grade has fewest pupils make run on sentences?

According to the results examined grades 1 & 2 had only two pupils making run on sentences.

What grade has the most individual students make run on sentences?

In this survey grade 8 had all six of the students making run on sentences; while grades three and five had five of the six pupils making run on sentence errors.

would you expect that the grade level that wrote the most words would write the most run on sentences?

Not so in this instance. Grade 8 wrote a total of 2,613 words with a total of 30 run on sentences but grade five while writing 1.192 words had 36 run on sentences.

Would you expect more run on sentences if a pupil uses more conjunctions?

The general tendency in the data collected seemes to indicate this to be true across the grades.

Would you expect to find a pupil making more writing errors other than run on sentences if more conjunctions are used?

The examination of this data for each child at each grade level does not indicate a consistency here. Across the grades it didn't appear to matter if a student used more conjunctions or not as there did not appear to be any observable relationship. In grades 7 & 8 however, there was a stronger relationship. At these levels it appeared with more regularity and when a student used more conjunctions he was more likely to make errors in his writing.

What error(s) do you think would be made by the most pupils?

In this study out of a total sampling of 48 pupils:

35 of them or 73% placed no punctuation at the end of a sentence.

33 or 68% had run on sentences.

31 or 65% had omitted a capital at the beginning of a sentence.

The remaining errors were made by less than 50% of the pupils.

What errors would you expect occurred most frequently across the grades?

In this project the three top most occurring errors were:

1) Capital omitted at beginning of a sentence (occurred 151 times)

2) No punctuation at the end of a sentence. (occurred 141 times)

3) Run on sentence (occurred 122 times)

What grade levels would you expect to find the highest percent of errors? (% of errors = Total Errors ÷ Total Words Written)

In this case the data indicates the

4th grade 20%

3rd grade 20%

2nd grade 20%

1st grade 19%

What would you expect are the errors made by more than 50% of the pupils on a particular grade level?

According the the tabulation of the data in this survey the following represents 50% or more of the students per grade level making the error.

1st grade	- No punctuation at the end of a sentence	.500
2nd grade	- Capital incorrectly placed.	.667
	No punctuation used to end a sentence	.667
3rd grade	- No punctuation used at end of sentence.	1.000
	Run on sentence.	.883
	Capital omitted at beginning of sentence.	.883
	Conjunction incorrectly used at sentence beginning. .	.667
	Capital incorrectly placed	:500
4th grade	- Capital incorrectly placed within a sentence.	.833
	Capital omitted at sentence beginning	.667
	Comma used for sentence ending.	.667
	No punctuation at end of sentence	.667
	Run on sentence.	.667
	No subject in sentence by needed.	.500
	Fragment	.500
5th grade	- Capital omitted at beginning of sentence	.833
	Conjunction incorrectly used at sentence beginning . .	.833
	Run on sentence	.833
	No punctuation used at end of sentence	.667
	Conjunction used incorrectly to add or extend ideas. .	.667

5th grade -	Capital incorrectly placed within a sentence.	.500
	Capital omitted where necessary	.500
	Appositive not punctuated	.500
	Fragment	.500
6th grade -	Capital omitted at sentence beginning	.667
	No punctuation at the end of a sentence	.667
	Conjunction used incorrectly to extend ideas.	.667
	Run on sentence.	.667
	Conjunction incorrectly used at sentence beginning . .	.500
7th grade -	Capital omitted at sentence beginning.	.667
	No punctuation at the end of a sentence.	.667
	Conjunction used incorrectly to extend ideas	.667
	Run on sentence	.667
	No subject in sentence but needed	.500
8th Grade -	Capital omitted at sentence beginning	1.000
	No punctuation at end of sentence	1.000
	Run on sentence	1.000
	No subject in sentence but needed.	.833
	Fragment.	.833
	Comma used for sentence ending.	.667
	No predicate but needed	.667
	Conjunction used incorrectly at sentence beginning. .	.500

What errors would you expect would be made by less than 50% of all the pupils?

These errors were made by between 10 and 50% of all the pupils in this study. While error analysis was not all inclusive, of the twenty types of errors tallied, these are the findings:

1.	Capital placed incorrectly in a sentence.	.417
2.	Conjunction used at sentence beginning incorrectly. . .	.396
3.	Conjunction used incorrectly to join or extend thoughts	.396
4.	Fragments.	.354
5.	Comma used for punctuation at end of a sentence	.313
6.	Subject, needed but omitted	.313
7.	Capital letter <u>not</u> used correctly within a sentence . .	.250
8.	Predicate needed but omitted.	.250
9.	Incorrect verb tense.	.229
10.	No comma used in a series	.167
11.	Appositive not set off by commas.	.146
12.	Object of the verb needed by omitted.	.146
13.	Comma used within a sentence incorrectly.	.104
14.	Incorrect punctuation used at end of sentence	.083
15.	No Agreement between subject and predicate.	.083

As you theorized tendencies you undoubtedly had different responses, and this is to be expected. However, it is our hopes that you found it interesting to compare theories in relation to your unique situation with the inclinations uncovered by this study and appreciate "What's Happening?" in another school.

CONCLUSION:

According to the tendencies developed by this study, elementary school writers in this school at the time of this sampling appeared to have difficulty placing punctuation at the end of a sentence, treating their ideas separately and capitalizing the beginning of a new and/or different idea. Run on sentences then, in this case, are a problem across the grades. These three types of errors not only appeared most frequently across the grades but were consistently made by the most pupils.

In this case teachers across the grades need to develop their own strategies in teaching, correcting and guiding their students to overcome this problem area. The data calls for teacher evaluation and attention.

The problem of punctuation, capitalization and keeping ideas separate appear closely related with one nurturing the other two. It, therefore, appears quite likely that greater skill development in any one of these areas should result in the lessoning of the occurrence of the other two.